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SOME ASPECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES
OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND ITS AGENCIES

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(Talk given by Ralph S. Roberts, Administrative Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, at Joint Operation-Personnel Management Conference of U. S. Forest Service, Washington, D. C., February 28, 1956)

It is always a pleasure for me to meet with a group of this kind. It is indeed an honor to be invited to participate with you in this Conference. During my 15 years in the United States Department of Agriculture, I have developed a real pride in the work of the Forest Service. I enjoy the opportunity that meetings of this kind provide for renewing old friendships and beginning new ones, and for sharing ideas about our common purposes and our common problems. Through such meetings a great deal is done to improve our understanding of the activities we carry on. They contribute materially to the doing of a better job.

The ability to put ourselves in the other fellow's shoes is never easily achieved nor painlessly maintained. All of us tend to look too much at the things that go on around us as if our own vantage point were the one spot designed for objective vision. We wear professional blinders that bias what we see, and therefore ^{what} we think, and what we do. Unfortunately, that is a general characteristic of human nature.

I know you are all familiar with the common separation of our activities into those concerned with program and policy and those concerned with administration and management. A wordy, useless debate sometimes rages about which of these areas should be given the greatest emphasis. The parties to such a debate demonstrate little, save their own shortsightedness and their failure to recognize that both kinds of activities must go hand-in-hand in any successful enterprise. If either is permitted to dominate the other, our activities become unbalanced and suffer as a result.

My purpose in singling out administrative management for comment this morning is not to continue this debate; nor is it to demonstrate that management activities can ever be separated from program activities, in practice. Rather, it is to isolate briefly one coordinate part of what we do, so that it may be, I hope, better understood.

The area of administrative management is varied and extensive. Traditionally, we recognize that it involves planning, budgeting, and organizing both manpower and work. It concerns the staffing and equipping of our organizations and the direction and coordination of work within them. And not of least importance, it involves reporting, both internally, for management purposes, and to the public, so that they may judge the quality of our stewardship and our work in their behalf.

The purpose of administrative management in a government agency, is the same as it is in private industry: to make possible the greatest accomplishment with the least effort -- the maximum of efficiency and effectiveness. All of its separate parts must be linked together to this end, with each one given its due weight and contributing its full share. Though a particular part may be emphasized at one time, in response to a special need, and another at another time, none should ever be forgotten or left too long untended. All are essential to a good management job.

Broadly, the Secretary of Agriculture is responsible for administrative management within the Department. But an organization as large and complex as ours cannot possibly be "managed" by one man, alone. Management responsibilities must be delegated to others and, in turn, re-delegated, until they are shared by a great many persons. Therefore, we must recognize the interdependence involved in achieving a high quality of management performance. The responsibility rests on all of us to see that our part of the job is well done, and that it is integrated with the efforts of others.

The Federal Government is expected to operate according to the best standards of administrative management. Those of us with management responsibility must know what those standards are, how they may be best applied, and how objectives can be achieved most effectively. Otherwise, we will fail to fulfill the purposes of management and to gain and hold public respect. At the present time, it seems to me that there are certain areas in which we are not doing this job as well as we might. I would like to comment briefly on two or three of them.

First, we need to pay much closer attention to developments affecting management functions and techniques, wherever they are taking place. The arts of administrative management are never static, for as men continue to think and study and grow in the face of persistent problems, they are bound to develop new and more fruitful ways of meeting them. The best of these techniques should be adapted to our use in Government.

One barrier to this approach has been the assumption many of us make that the purposes and tasks of management are so different in business and Government that the same techniques cannot be applied in both situations. Happily, this idea seems to be passing away, the victim of our enlarged experience. During the past two decades, national crises have brought into the Government management talent from corporate enterprises and universities. This experience taught those of us who are career civil servants that there are a great many similarities between business and Governmental administration; that there is much to be gained from the cross-fertilization which gives the Federal Government the opportunity to benefit from the experience and resources of private business.

In 1939, Chester I. Barnard, then President of the New Jersey Bell Telephone Company, wrote a book in which he attempted to analyze the

characteristics of all formal organizations, independent of their jurisdictions and their programs. He assumed that all of these organizations are basically the same and argued for the assumption in this common-sense way:

"Many times I have noted that executives are able to understand each other with very few words when discussing essential problems of organization, provided that the questions are stated without dependence upon the technologies of their respective fields. This is strikingly true, in fact chiefly observable, when men of radically different fields discuss such questions Clergymen, military men, government officials, university officials, and men of widely diversified businesses, when not conscious of an attempt to discuss organization as such, have seemed to show an understanding -- or better, a sense -- that is quite similar. To me it has long seemed probable that there are universal characteristics of organization that are active understandings, evaluations, concepts, of men skilled in organizing, not only in the present but in past generations."

The validity of Barnard's judgment may be demonstrated by the fact that his book, The Functions of the Executive, has become a basic work in university training for business administration, public administration, and educational administration.

All of us marvel in this age at the advances being made in medicine, science, and technology. We are wiping out diseases that once were judged incurable; we are lengthening human life. Our capacity for controlling the physical world and bending it to our purposes is immense. We are releasing

new stores of energy that will increase our physical well-being and comfort in ways that startle the imagination.

These accomplishments contain a lesson for all of us. They represent victories for a spirit and a pattern of action that guided the men who achieved them. We would do well to be guided by this same spirit -- a willingness to seek new ideas and new ways of doing things, to move forward in the exploration and resolution of insistent problems; an intense desire to improve our skills and our performance.

Characteristic of the scientist is receptivity to useful ideas and new methods. Active search for these ideas is part of the positive mental outlook without which progress would be unlikely. We, who carry management responsibility in the Federal Government, must also be receptive to useful ideas, and devote the necessary time and energy to finding them. They will not be magically revealed. We must seek knowledge available in articles and books which have been written on management. We must attend meetings where such subjects are discussed. No effort should be spared in exploring developments in business, in other agencies, in other governmental jurisdictions, and in institutions of higher learning, that hold the promise of increasing our ability to do a good job.

To learn about what's going on is not enough, however. What is learned must be soundly applied. Too often, we are reluctant to invade new areas because we fear the burdens change may bring. If we have any such inclinations, let us forever remind ourselves that progress would fade into oblivion in the face of that kind of thinking. If we are to improve what we do, we must be willing to accept the work and responsibility of thoughtful change.

As a second major point, then, we need to experiment much more actively with new ideas and turn vigorously to the solution of our problems.

We are fortunate in having many of these problems isolated for us. The Hoover Commissions, in both 1949 and 1955, called our attention to serious difficulties which require the attention of all persons concerned with the improvement of management in the Government. In our own Department, we have completed during the past year a comprehensive review of field services that has helped to clarify some of our management problems. But it is not enough to know what our difficulties are. We must be prepared to take constructive action.

One of the areas in which work is needed concerns the management of paperwork. This is a problem that must be seen and handled in all of its aspects. We cannot work on forms, alone, or on correspondence, alone, or on records, alone. We need to work on all of them. But more importantly, we need to work on the processes that produce them. Only by so doing can we frame our efforts into a comprehensive program to eliminate unnecessary written material at the point of origin, to raise the quality and usefulness of what is prepared, and to retain "essential" material only as long as it is essential.

The Secretary has asked the General Services Administration to assist the Department in improving its paperwork operations. A survey is now underway. When it is completed, we will know better where we stand, and it will be up to all of us to do something about it. In the meantime, it is well for agencies to undertake their own studies of this problem, as the Forest Service is now doing.

We have all heard a great deal about automation -- turning over to machines processes that now require human attention. I am sure that we

have all experienced a degree of initial skepticism about this development. It is now clear, however, that automation is something real and is here to stay. It is becoming increasingly apparent that it will influence office operations as well as production processes. It has the potential of revolutionizing some techniques and operations. All of us are going to be called on to think a great deal about it. Moreover, the public is going to expect us to make wise and full use of such equipment in doing our job in Government.

In approaching automation, however, we must exercise extreme caution. Applications made too rapidly and with too little thought can be costly in the long run. It is wise to precede any applications with thorough-going study and analysis. I am pleased to note that the Forest Service is undertaking such a study, in conjunction with its analysis of paperwork problems. This serves to confirm once again the judgment that your Service has a concept which engenders progressive sound management.

There are many other problem areas that we might discuss if time were available. We need to give attention to the proper use of space, particularly from the standpoint of service to the public and wholesome public relations at field locations. Budgetary and fiscal procedures need further refinement and simplification. The administration of Government-owned housing is far from perfection. We could make much more effective use of our physical equipment. I am sure that all of you could add many items to that list, and you should.

Since many of you are concerned with personnel problems, a brief word should be added about the management of manpower. Good management practice rests ultimately on the capacity of individual employees, and on their

knowledge and skills. We are now experiencing personnel shortages in some important competencies and experience. Rapid turnover, and complex developments in the management field, demand that we give such matters special attention. First, we need to do a better job of recruiting well-qualified personnel. The new Federal Service Entrance Examination is a positive step in this direction. By combining some 120 separate examinations into one, it greatly simplifies access to the Federal Service and enables the Government to compete more effectively for college graduates. It does not solve the entire problem, however, and it is clear that further imaginative action is necessary if the Government is to receive its necessary share of talented persons.

Attention must also be given to our systems of placement and classification. Too often, the rigid standards we have erected interfere with the placement of persons in positions which they could fill, even though they lack the formal requirements. We need to understand a great deal more about the qualities that make for good performance on a job before we will have a really satisfactory placement system.

This problem is closely related with that of training and career development. We need to do a much better job of rapidly giving an employee knowledge essential to the performance of his job, so that he may become fully productive in the shortest possible time. We also ought to be especially attentive to promising employees, who can be brought along properly to responsible positions in which they can make the fullest use of their abilities, and who can be carefully groomed for still higher levels of responsibility. In all of this, we should try to integrate our training efforts with an over-all career development program that is Government-wide

in scope, so that opportunities for good persons can be enlarged and the entire Government benefitted by their contributions.

It is obvious that a very large part must be played in all of this by staff personnel serving as advisors to top management, by persons whose job it is to analyze and investigate matters of importance to management and prepare sound recommendations for action. At the present time, we tend to make very poor use of staff assistance in Government. Thus, as a third major point, I would suggest that we need to make more extensive and intelligent use of staff assistance. In the Forest Service, the term "scientific management" has long been used to describe the conscious, planned effort to administer program activities and management services on the basis of:

Research - which would inform, guide, and advise your executive levels concerning relevant factors on which decisions must be made;

Standards - which enable your people to know what is expected of them.

Controls - adequate to evaluate what you do, how you do it, and when.

Cooperation - achieved through written policies and procedures, delegations of authority, and deliberate cultivation of good morale through progressive and fair personnel policies.

The importance of staff is easily overlooked and lost among the vital, competing demands for our available manpower and funds. We incline to the intensive development of operating areas and to brush-off staff work as expendable. Yet a high quality of staff work can mean the difference between good and bad management.

Line executives are usually overworked. They are seldom free from the urgent pressures of necessities. Hours are rarely available for the

careful and thorough analysis and exploration of complex problem situations. To them, aides who do have this time are essential and, if properly used, can be a source of important guidance. And, I might add, would result in fewer "by gosh and by heck" decisions by administrators.

Recently, I heard an executive of one of our large, private business enterprises discuss this phase of management. He pointed out that his corporation, before making the final selection, had invested over \$100,000, during a two-year period, in a thorough study of public reaction to a variety of possible new trademarks to identify their products. This careful analysis as a basis for decision is the essence of staff work. If it is well done, it can be a very sound investment. In private enterprise, the staff dollar is well spent when it yields economy in the much larger area of factory production, or marketing of products in wholesale or retail distribution, or in the operations of a satisfied customer. We in government do not usually have the discipline of profit or loss. Nevertheless, we can through adequate management methods adopt substitute disciplines. Reliance on staff expertness in management for relevant facts affecting operating conditions is one such approach.

Some executives make little use of staff because they either don't know how to use them, or they regard them as an unnecessary accessory. When challenged, they recount examples of cases in which staff work led to blind alleys. This is hardly damning evidence. The good staff man, like the good scientist, must explore all possible alternatives. Though he should exercise seasoned judgment, he cannot be expected to come up with a winner every time. If his work ends in a blind alley, the frequently useful end of knowing that the alley is there and that this alternative can be ignored in future deliberations is served.

This should not be taken as an apology for poorly executed staff work, however. Staff personnel have a responsibility, too, for maintaining a high standard of performance, and for doing a thorough job. If staff analysis is inadequate, if investigations have not been thorough, if results, conclusions, and recommendations for action are not stated in positive, clear, and concise terms, staff aid is worse than useless -- in fact, it may itself create problems.

In thinking about what our responsibilities are in the area of administrative management, it is helpful to look at our past performance. In the history and literature of governmental administration, the U. S. Department of Agriculture occupies an enviable position. No other Department in the Federal structure is so well known for the excellence of its management and the high quality of its efforts to maintain that standard. No other Department has been so well served through the years by outstanding practitioners and scholars of the administrative art. It has an unequalled heritage of progressive administrative thinking and constructive administrative action.

We in the present day can do nothing less than to keep that heritage alive and to strive with all our energy and intelligence to maintain and surpass our past performance. Our responsibility for this is clear and has perhaps nowhere been more aptly put than in these words from your own Chief:

"I believe that every member of the Forest Service is doing a job important to the Forest Service and to conservation generally. This is one reason why I have insisted on my visits around the country that I be given a chance to meet everyone in the Forest Service and not just the biggest wheels. What the Forest Service accomplishes is the sum total of what each one of us gets done.

"We find ourselves getting further and further into a situation where we must somehow get more work done without corresponding increases in manpower and money. We also are finding that to maintain our position with respect to other conservation agencies we must raise our sights and turn out higher quality work. What was good enough only a few years ago is not good enough now. Individual competence -- the ability to do top-quality work and a lot of it -- is more and more becoming the measure by which we are judged."

Again, I appreciate the opportunity of meeting with you in one of these conference sessions. The Secretary's Office is intensely interested in your efforts to improve management. If we can be helpful in any way, please do not hesitate to call us.

Good luck, and thank you.